

Cultivating Christian Character

How to become
the person God wants you to be
and how to help others do the same



Colorado Springs, Colorado



*Textbooks, Trade Books, and Other Educational Resources
for Christian Educators and Schools Worldwide*

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Table of Contents

Figures and Tables	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Part I: How to Measure Your Character	1
Chapter 1: A Tool for Measuring Your Character	3
Chapter 2: Where Are Christians Stronger and Weaker in Character?	13
Part II: How to Develop Your Character	19
Chapter 3: Three Approaches to Cultivating Christian Character	21
Chapter 4: Grow Your Gratitude	27
Chapter 5: Become More God-Centered by Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines	39
Chapter 6: Learn to Live Joyfully	49
Part III: How to Help Others Grow in Character	59
A Prefatory Word About Part III	61
Chapter 7: A Syllabus for Discipling the New Christian	63
Chapter 8: His Growth, Her Growth: The Different Character Challenges for Men and Women	71
Chapter 9: Chic Sheep: Discipling Today's Teenager	79
Chapter 10: Where Character Bottoms Out: The Overextended Years of the Twenties and Thirties	87
Chapter 11: Weighed Down on the Way Up: Ministering to the Over-Forty Christian	97
Chapter 12: Prodding Prodigals: What's Missing for the Low-Virtue Christian?	105
Appendix A: The Methodology Behind This Study	111
Appendix B: Helpful Resources for Cultivating Christian Character	115
Notes	119
References	123

Chapter 3

Three Approaches to Cultivating Christian Character

Most of us have seen Katherine. You can't miss her. She's the one with the halo.

Katherine's the personification of "pure in heart." She has patience at times when we'd surely be raising our voice. She forgives when we'd be complaining. She smiles incessantly. She lives a relatively stress-free life, even though her circumstances are not much different from our own. She's seldom in a rush, she's not self-conscious about what she looks like or what others think of her, she always seems to have time to listen or to help. And to top it off, she spends more time with God in a day than most of us do in a week.

Katherine's genuinely happy, living the best life possible. She's got it all together. So does Ken ... and Lamar ... and Marsha ... and other paragons of virtue we've known in our life. They're not perfect, of course, but in so many ways they remind us of Jesus Christ.

Do you ever think, Wouldn't it be nice if people would say that about me? And, Wouldn't it be nice if I could live that way too? Of course it would. And it will be nice when it happens. Those of us who are not quite there just need to get ahold of Katherine's secret formula for becoming a high-virtue Christian, mix up a batch for ourselves, and then drink deeply.

Many wise people throughout the centuries have tried their hand at explaining the sanctification process. So, given this plethora of proposals, I'm somewhat reluctant to admit that discovering God's blueprint for growth is my task here as well. However,

my approach to the problem is distinct from the others insofar as it's a *scientific* approach rather than one that's exegetical, theological, psychological, philosophical, or anecdotal. That is, the method I'm using here for unraveling the mystery of Christian character is empirical, data-driven, investigational. In plain English, I'm seeking the pathways to Christlike character by studying consistently Christlike people—about two thousand of them, in fact. I've compared these many high-virtue Christians to thousands of Christians who are not as Christlike. In doing so, I've uncovered some of their secrets to success, so to speak—how high-virtue Christians got to be the way they are. There is, in essence, a three-part approach that many of them follow for growing and maintaining Christian character.

A Prefatory Word About the Methodology

Before we get to that approach, though, I should make a few things clear about how I found these people, how I gathered information from them, and how I was able to distinguish high-virtue Christians from other Christians. This is a quick overview, but for those who want more information, I've included an appendix to this book as well as some technical footnotes throughout the book to more fully explain what I did.

First of all, I didn't find most of these people; they found me. More specifically, they found my website and voluntarily completed the electronic version of the Christian Character Index (CCI). They paid nothing to complete it, and they did not reveal their identity at any time (free access and anonymity is important for collecting accurate information from people). Those completing the CCI did, however, provide important demographic information about themselves (e.g., gender, age, state/country, years as a Christian, denomination) —information that helps us to better understand some of the correlates of growth.

For Reflection and Discussion

The approach of comparing top performers to the second-best performers—gold medalists to silver medalists, if you will—is a relatively common investigational strategy among researchers. It's considered quite powerful for determining how one can take that final step to greater success. Could you apply this learn-from-the-best approach on a personal scale, perhaps by examining the life of someone you know who is more spiritually mature than you?

In all, for this study, I received surveys from over five thousand Christians, representing all fifty states and almost sixty countries. The data set is a veritable gold mine, containing information about

the attitudes, priorities, religious practices, and virtue of a wide array of believers. Through a relatively sophisticated statistical technique,¹ I was able to sort these people into three groups—high-, average-, and low-virtue Christians. Then I examined what makes the high-virtue Christian different.

In particular, *I looked closely at what distinguishes the high-virtue Christian from the average-virtue Christian.* Since most of us fall into the latter category, this seems to be the analysis that’s most germane to the Christian community.² How can good Christians become great Christians? How can we finally break through to consistently be the people God calls us to be?

How Good Christians Become Great Christians

I should underscore up front here something implied in chapter 2: high-virtue Christianity is not a matter of demographics. High-virtue Christians are not predominantly female or male, older or younger. Moreover, they are not predominantly veteran Christians either. As indicated in table 3-1, there are only trivial differences between high- and average-virtue Christians in gender, age, and years as a believer. None of these slight demographic differences explains the character of high-virtue Christians.³

	High-Virtue Christians	Average-Virtue Christians
Average age	35.1	33.5
Average number of years as a Christian	19.2	18.0
Percentage of this group that is female	61%	58%

Table 3-1
Demographic Comparison of High- and Average-Virtue Christians

So what is it that distinguishes the high-virtue Christian? This fascinating, timeless question was the impetus for my project. And the answer is equally fascinating, I think. Perhaps more so.

High-virtue Christians, by definition, significantly outdo average-virtue Christians in every area of character. As shown in figure 3-1, though, *there are three attributes that best explain why high-virtue Christians are different from average-virtue Christians. Those attributes—those three pillars of success—are gratitude, joyful living, and God-centeredness*

through the practice of the spiritual disciplines. Christians who have sown these three seeds into their lifestyle are far more likely to reap maximum Christian character—to become high-virtue Christians, to see manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit in their life. Fundamental but elusive Christian virtues (e.g., love, inner peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, compassion, and the ability to forgive) all flow from the roots of gratitude, joyful living, and God-centeredness.

This is a critically important finding. It may be an approach to growth that will change your life if you try it in earnest. So the point warrants reinforcement: *High-virtue Christians are more consistently Christlike than average-virtue Christians, in large part because of their gratitude, their joyful lifestyle, and their God-centeredness.*

Let's be perfectly clear about something though. It's not that average-virtue Christians are particularly ungrateful or that they have no joy or that they have zero God-centeredness. That's not at all the case. What we can say is that there are significant gaps between average- and high-virtue Christians in these areas. And those gaps—those differences in gratitude, joy, and God-centering disciplines—are the reasons that a host of other differences exist, such as differences in inner peace, patience, kindness, and so on; differences in overall Christlike character; differences in qualities that so many Christians strive futilely to develop. High-virtue Christians have discovered and traveled a sacred pathway. We might be wise to follow.

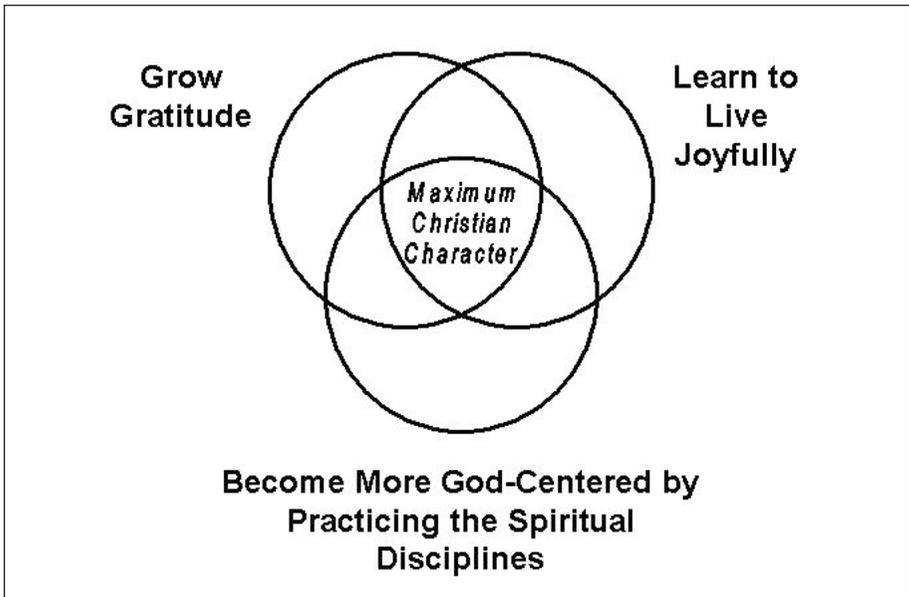


Figure 3-1
Three Approaches to Cultivating Christian Character

The Convergence of Scientific Knowledge and Biblical Knowledge

Note from figure 3-1 that the three areas that generate maximum Christian character are not independent of one another but are better conceptualized as interlocking circles. On their own, each one will certainly affect our character for the better, but we achieve *maximum* Christlikeness when we cultivate all three areas, when they induce each other and “combine forces,” so to speak, to spawn something that is, in fact, greater than the sum of its parts. As we’ll see, gratitude is one of the primary influencers of joy. Joy is something that makes us more likely to practice God-centering disciplines. And God-centeredness helps to grow both gratitude and joy.

So this is a completely interdependent system. What that means is that even though each of these three areas affects our Christlikeness on its own, it is the combination of all three—their synergy—that culminates in a superlative pathway to growth. Our potential for Christlike character and, indeed, our potential to glorify God with our lives resides in the intersection.

And interestingly, this three-part approach evidences a convergence between scientific knowledge and biblical knowledge. It was the apostle Paul who wrote that we need to “be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). It’s not often that the New Testament makes the direct statement “this is God’s will,” but it does here—where the blueprint appears to parallel the findings of this study: joy, continual prayer (an indication of God-centeredness), and gratitude. Since these findings were generated with scientific rigor—independent of any scriptural parameters or presuppositions—the parallel is indeed noteworthy.

Some Practical Advice

I report here that “high-virtue Christians are more consistently Christlike than average-virtue Christians, in large part because of their gratitude, their joyful lifestyle, and their God-centeredness.” Working on these three areas is essentially a fast track to growth in every area of Christian virtue. Consider experimenting with this three-dimensional approach. Over the next month, consider working on these three areas and see whether your progress has a noticeable effect on other areas of your character.

The Next Step: Exploring Each Element

Another approach for growth in Christlikeness? I admit that I'm a little bit skeptical when I read about such things. You might be too—maybe more than a little bit skeptical. You might have a hundred legitimate questions about the logic and derivation of my findings, such as, Why would gratitude lead to Christian character, and how does one actually grow gratitude? What is it about joyful living that makes it an essential ingredient of growth, and how do joyful people get to be that way? What does it mean to be “God-centered,” and why would such a condition take Christians to the next level of Christlikeness? And how did you reach any of these conclusions in the first place?

I endeavor to answer these and other such questions in the next three chapters, drawing guidance from the thousands of Christians who have volunteered personal information for this study, as well as from the bountiful literature on these subjects. I've also included an appendix that explains the methodology behind this research. It is my hope that you will find the conclusions and recommendations in this book to be thought-provoking, at the very least, and maybe even transforming—genuinely life-enhancing—if you choose to implement them for yourself.

With that audacious objective on the table, let's now turn to the first element in our three-dimensional approach: growing your gratitude.

Chapter 4

Grow Your Gratitude

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.
—Cicero

As introduced in chapter 3, gratitude is one of the distinguishing marks of the high-virtue Christian. But in fact, we can go much further with this statement: we've found that *gratitude is the characteristic that most distinguishes high-virtue Christians from average-virtue Christians*. More than joyful living. More than the practice of any—or all—of the spiritual disciplines. More than anything else.

Well, so what? That may be interesting information, but what does it really have to do with cultivating Christian character? A lot, actually. While Christians are unlikely to embrace the notion that gratitude is the “greatest of virtues,” gratitude does appear to be what the philosopher Cicero called a “parent virtue”—a virtue that begets other virtues. In my study of Christians, I found solid, confirming evidence of this. Growing one's gratitude has a radical and transformational effect on character, because gratitude is one of God's primary vehicles for *inducing* other Christian qualities. It's a vehicle that makes us better, more Christlike people. And that's the “so what.” Call it a “parent virtue,” call it the “gratitude effect,” call it miraculous, call it whatever you'd like. Regardless the label, gratitude is a powerful disposition that provides us with a very efficient, very effective mechanism for developing myriad character traits. Want more inner peace? Work on gratitude. Want more patience? Work on gratitude. Want to be more compassionate? You get the idea.

Gratitude does all this by setting a new thought context for processing our circum-

stances in life—a context of an abundant life; a context where everything we have is a gift, where we see clearly all that we really do have in life, and where we recognize that things could always be worse. Within this context, our view of the entire world is now different, and we are suddenly empowered to be the people God calls us to be—to more deeply love God, love neighbor, and love our own life; to be “fruit of the Spirit” Christians at home, at work, at church, everywhere.

This theory of gratitude as a parent virtue derives not only from ancient philosophers like Cicero, but, not surprisingly, from theologians as well. Exegetes of the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and the Qur’an have all seated gratitude as central among virtues.¹ What may surprise

some people, though, is that contemporary psychologists, too, have advanced and empirically tested this theory, concluding that gratitude “stimulates moral behavior” and encourages people to behave in a “pro-social manner.” Stated more concretely, they have shown that gratitude is positively related to such critical outcomes as life satisfaction, vitality, happiness, optimism, hope, empathy, and the willingness to provide emotional and tangible support for other people, while being negatively related to anxiety, depression, and overall disposition.² Collectively, such studies present credible evidence that feeling grateful generates a ripple effect through every area of our lives, potentially satisfying some of our deepest yearnings—our desire for happiness, our pursuit of better relationships, and our incessant quest for inner peace and contentment.

Pop psychology has piggybacked on these research findings, introducing gratitude to the mass market as a potential panacea. Simply peruse the self-help section of any major bookstore these days, and you’ll find that many of the best-selling books propagate the premise that gratitude is a key to joy, to replenishment of the soul, to inner transformation, and to blessing others with our lives. “Gratitude journals”—diaries with little more than flamboyant artwork and blank, lined pages—that flank the best sellers have now become best sellers themselves.

Given all this, it should be clear that what I present in this chapter regarding the effects of gratitude is not new information. Quite the contrary, what I report here is old and very public news. It’s news that’s been around for millennia. But that’s actu-

For Reflection and Discussion

What connections have you experienced between gratitude and your other character qualities? When you are feeling grateful, does that mindset influence your patience, your kindness, your joy, your sense of peace, your ability to forgive, or any of the other attributes discussed in this book?

ally a testimony to its merits. The advice to cultivate character through growing our gratitude is time-honored wisdom that transcends generations, cultures, and religious traditions.

Growing Gratitude by Disciplining Your Mind

Much of the above reasoning probably rings true for you. We've all experienced moments in life when we suddenly become cognizant of the enormity of blessing in our life. Maybe it was the moment of a narrowly averted collision with a tractor-trailer; a momentarily lost child at the store; a news segment about some illness that's plaguing a third world country; a phone call at three a.m. that, contrary to our fears, is not tragic news but only a wrong number; an eye-opening missions trip to a destitute area; a clarifying moment of watching our children sleep.

A wave of thankfulness quickly follows such events and lasts for as long as we remain mindful of the blessing. During that time, we experience significant manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit and other Christian virtues. We become more Christlike in our disposition toward everyone and everything. But then—and most of us have experienced this as well—the empowerment can vanish as suddenly as it appeared, and we're back to being the people we were before. The transformation, while welcome and wonderful, was fleeting. That's the nature of gratitude. It generates other virtues but only as long as it exists.

One of the major secrets to success for high-virtue Christians is that they have mastered the art of *maintaining* a grateful disposition. Gratitude is simply a part of who they are, rather than being some sporadic, refreshing occurrence. How do they do it? If persistent gratitude is one of their keys to consistent Christlikeness, how do they nurture and sustain a grateful spirit?

In a sentence, *they think differently than many of the rest of us think*. The mind of the high-virtue Christian, it seems, is a disciplined mind, a pure and godly mind, a mind that is adept at immediately clearing away sinful thoughts. It is a mind that's focused on what one *has* rather than what one does *not* have, a mind that refuses to think in terms of what's missing from life—in terms of how much better life could be “if only...” Instead, high-virtue Christians want what they have. They are fully content with what's been conferred upon them, and they frequently thank God for their blessings.

Let's look at the evidence regarding what goes on inside the heads of high- versus average-virtue Christians. First, more than half of high-virtue Christians (53 percent) say they “always” or “almost always” try to immediately clear sinful

thoughts from their minds. That's a tough thing to do, much less to do all the time! By comparison, this is true for fewer than one in five average-virtue Christians (18 percent). In other words, high-virtue Christians are about three times more likely to consistently insulate their minds from the junk that undermines most of us. Their minds are conditioned to eradicate the incubators for ingratitude—envy, jealousy, greed, lust, and so on. That's one of their secrets to success. High-virtue derives, in part, from high gratitude, and high gratitude begins with taking charge of the thought life.

That's especially true for thoughts that drift toward envy, since envy is the chief assailant of gratitude. The more we desire what other people have, the less satisfied we become with what we currently have. Thus, in an envious frame of mind, we are blinded to God's providence, ungrateful for what He has done, and ungrateful for what He continues to do in our lives.

In general, I found that high-virtue Christians, more so than others, reject this kind of thinking. Not all of them have completely repudiated envy, but more than two out of three high-virtue Christians (68 percent) say they “rarely” or “never” desire what others have. By contrast, more than half of average-virtue Christians (55 percent) report being envious “sometimes,” “often,” or “always.” As such, many of them remain in a mind-set that steals their gratitude and, with it, the numerous virtues that are the descendants of gratitude.

What do high-virtue Christians think about instead of entertaining envious thoughts? Where are their minds during their day-to-day routine? Figure 4-1 presents the striking statistic that reveals one of the key differences between high- and average-virtue Christians. Four out of five high-virtue Christians consistently remember throughout the day how God has blessed them. Only two out of five average-virtue Christians say they do this.

One might reasonably ask at this point, Are these people thanking God more than others do because they are well-off financially? Because they have more material possessions, more temporal assets, than do others? These are not the reasons for

Some Practical Advice

How disciplined is your mind? Over the next twenty-four hours, think about what you think about. Try to gauge whether you are thinking primarily in terms of what you have or in terms of what's missing from your life. Do you have a problem here? If so, make a commitment to do something about it.

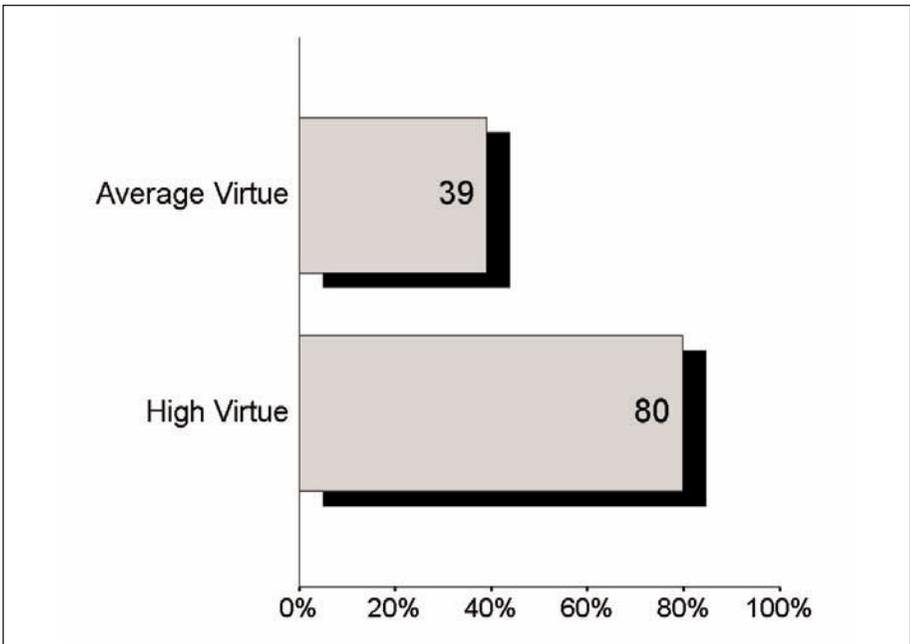


Figure 4-1

Percentage Who Consistently Think About How Much God Has Blessed Them

their gratitude. In fact, I found that gratitude may be related to having *fewer* worldly goods. By far, the most grateful group in my study are those who identify themselves as “black,” and given the generally lower socioeconomic status of blacks as compared to whites, this is interesting evidence that material possessions are not what drives and sustains a grateful heart.³

What does drive gratitude is proper perspective—seeing clearly, remaining mindful moment to moment of what God has bestowed upon you. High-virtue Christians are perpetually aware of their bountiful life, regardless of what that life entails. They have trained their minds to think about the abundance in their life rather than the insufficiencies. And it is this habit—a habit of keeping perspective—that transports them to the next level of gratitude and of character.

This is information that can change your life, as it has for many throughout the centuries. Everything can be different for you starting today if you begin implementing these recommendations. So to facilitate that transformation, it might be helpful to encapsulate these findings into a one-sentence, bottom-line summary: *The most fertile ground for growing gratitude is a thought life that purges sinful thoughts before they fester, that eradicates envy, and that replaces these thoughts with reminders of how richly blessed we really are.* The apostle Paul apparently had the same answer,

For Reflection and Discussion

How can you transform negative, envious thoughts into gratefulness? What can you do at the moment you're feeling envious or ungrateful to eliminate those thoughts and to substitute instead thoughts about how abundant your life is?

but he stated it more succinctly and more eloquently: "Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Indeed, perpetual gratitude begins with a renewed mind.

Practical Recommendations for Growing Gratitude

There is more that can be said though. In fact, one must say more lest we make the common mistake of pointing people in the right direction without furnishing them the means by which they can traverse the journey. The question still remains, *How does one gain this new mind-set?* Besides meditating on the blessings in my life and taking captive envious thoughts, what else can I do to train my mind to be more grateful? There are some practical habits that Christians have found to be valuable for growing and preserving a grateful disposition—habits that sustain them in regularly seeing life in the context of what they do have rather than what they don't have. Let's look at a few of these.

Grow Gratitude Through Keeping a Gratitude Journal

I did not test this proposition in this study, but almost unanimously, commentators both in and out of Christian circles suggest keeping a "gratitude journal." This is a daily diary that focuses exclusively on the blessings in your life, thereby re-centering you on God's providence. Beyond that, a journal permits you to look back over several days, weeks, and months to review the many blessings that you might have forgotten had you not written them down.

Donald Whitney (1993, 201) speaks to this point in a fine chapter on the benefits and the practice of journaling. Among his many helpful insights, he says the following:

Many people think God has not blessed them with much until they move it all to a new address! In the same way, we tend to forget just how many times God has answered specific prayers, made timely provision, and done marvelous things in our lives. But having a place to collect all those memories prevents their being forgotten.

Moreover, from the world of social science we find budding empirical evidence of the value of gratitude journals. In an experiment using undergraduate students, those students who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis reported more progress toward their personal goals, exercised more regularly, were more optimistic about the upcoming week, and felt better about their lives as a whole than those who kept weekly journals of hassles or of neutral life events (Emmons and Crumpler 2000, 64).

Many claim there is power in the spiritual discipline of journaling, so to grow gratitude, you may want to give it a try. If you do, remember that there's no "one right way" to do this. Just use a format that you find helpful. You don't need to buy a special edition, full-color, twenty-dollar journal at your local bookstore. You don't need to be concerned about whether your writing makes sense. You don't need to worry about *why* you are grateful for these things. Simply let the words flow.

The standard recommendation is to log five blessings per day. List more, list fewer; the exact number is not important. Just list some daily. For the first couple of weeks, the blessings you list may be a bit repetitive from one day to the next. Over time, though, people generally find themselves including in their journal many new and formerly unrecognized gifts from God.

No one can say what you'll discover through this process. However, one thing is almost certain: through keeping a gratitude journal, you'll probably grow your gratitude, and through that, you'll likely grow many other Christian qualities.

Grow Gratitude Through the Disciplines of Periodic Fasting and Confession of Sin

I should note at the outset that one can certainly grow gratitude without fasting. In fact, looking at the most grateful one-third of Christians in this study, a high percentage (78 percent) say that they do *not* fast regularly. But I also found that fasting is one of the practices that can help people cultivate a strong and persistent feeling of thankfulness. Overall, there is a patent, positive relationship between periodic fasting and one's level of gratitude. We see from figure 4-2 that people who have a lower level of gratitude are not in the habit of fasting and that people who have a higher level of gratitude are much more likely to be fasters. In fact, by the time we get to the high-end of the gratitude spectrum, about 50 percent of these most grateful Christians say that they have made periodic fasting a habit.

This finding is consistent with traditional Christian theology, which regards fasting as, among other things, a reminder that we do not live by bread alone (Matthew

4:4)—that it is not food that sustains us, but it is God. And as we recall that teaching anew through fasting, we may feel more appreciative and more grateful to our Sustainer. Interestingly, Muslim theology makes this fasting-gratitude linkage even more explicitly. The holy book of Islam, the Qur’an, prescribes an annual, month-long period of fasting (Ramadhan) with the express goal of growing gratitude: “He wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify him that he has guided you, and perchance ye shall be grateful” (Qur’an, 2:185).

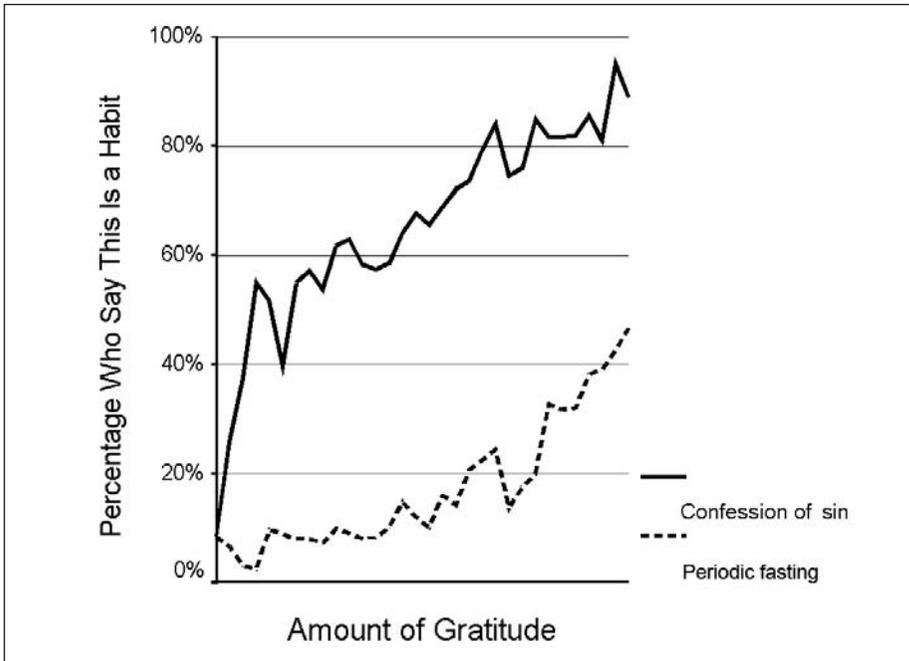


Figure 4-2
Regular Confession and Fasting May Grow Gratitude

It is easy to experiment with this phenomenon for yourself. Just try going without food for a day and instead, use your mealtime for prayer or some other God-centered activity. You’ll likely enhance your appreciation for the gift of food and the sustenance of God.

The same linkage exists between confession of sin and greater gratitude. Why would this be? It is likely that regularly bringing our sin before God reminds us of both our flaws and God’s grace. The combination of contritely admitting sin and knowing it has been cleansed will automatically generate feelings of thanksgiving. The relationship works the other way as well: a stronger spirit of gratitude toward God leads us to a greater willingness to bring our sins before Him ... which leads to more cleans-

ing ... which leads to more gratitude on our part ... which leads to more willingness to bring our sins before Him, and so on. It's a theory of an upward spiral, a theory that is now bolstered by this finding of a positive association between confession and gratitude.

Grow Gratitude by Habitually Praying for the Poor

I also found a connection between remembering the poor in one's prayers and growing in gratitude. Figure 4-3 graphically illustrates the almost-linear relationship here. The trend is remarkably consistent. Those who pray this type of prayer more frequently also report being more grateful in life.⁴

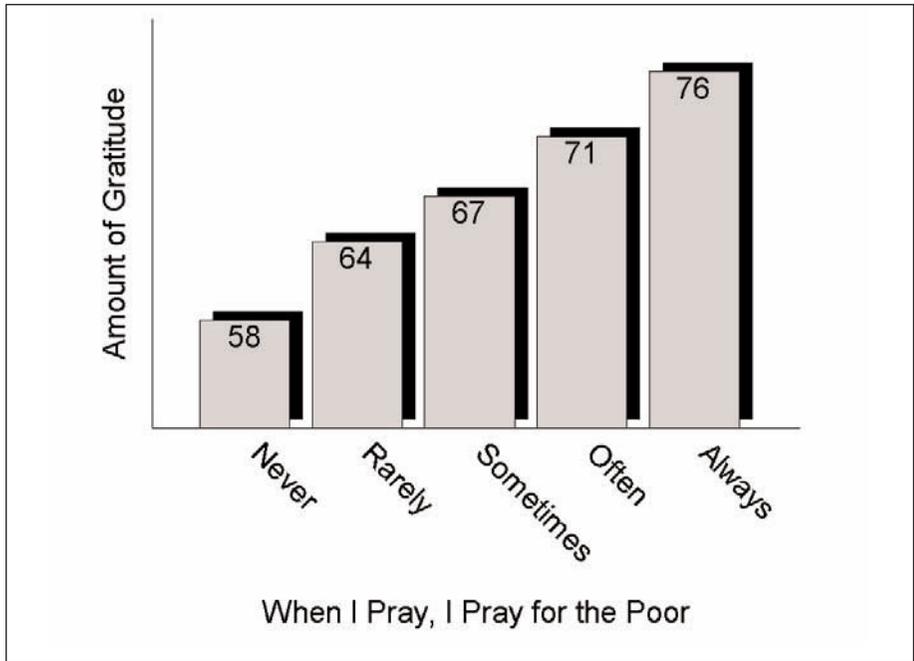


Figure 4-3
The Connection Between Gratitude and Praying for the Poor

This happens, in all likelihood, because when one prays for those who have less, one is reminded of how much tougher his or her life could be. The practice not only comports with a scriptural mandate for intercession (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:1, John 17), but it essentially serves as a corrective to

For Reflection and Discussion

What information can you keep in front of you to remind you of how blessed you are? Can praying for the poor regularly or reflecting on the plight of others facilitate gratefulness for you?

keep one's own life in perspective. Our frame of reference becomes the impoverished widow, the hungry child, the jobless father, the disease-ridden infant, the refugee forced from home by war, the third-world neighbor without electricity or running water. Praying daily for these people is a practice that illuminates our own existence in the blazing light of God's providence, and as a result, we experience a stunning series of reversals. Envy gives way to fulfillment. Resentment gives way to contentment. Complaints give way to praise. The catalyst through it all is gratitude, borne of a clearer perspective that's generated by reflecting on the poor.

Growing Gratitude by Creatively Developing Your Own Habits

The common denominator through these gratitude-generating habits is that they facilitate a fresh perspective on our life circumstances. With that principle in mind, you can develop other habits that work specifically for you—habits that will have a powerful effect on your own perspective, habits that remind you of just how good things are or of how much worse things could be. And it doesn't matter if they seem like weird habits, if others might not understand their connection to gratitude, or if they are not sanctioned by some religious body somewhere. What does matter is that the habits you create engender in you the attitude that you are richly blessed by God.

To stimulate your thinking, let me speak personally for a moment and share with you briefly two habits that I've adopted. Some might say they are peculiar habits. I prefer to think of them as novel and pragmatic. Regardless the characterization, I offer them as examples of creative solutions that can grow gratitude daily.

Novel Habit #1: Whenever I see the number 518—whether on a digital clock, on a license plate, in an address, or elsewhere—I immediately thank God for my wife. Strange? On the surface, it might seem so. But the idea is prompted by the Scripture verse Proverbs 5:18, which says, “Rejoice in the wife of your youth.” So I make it a practice to rejoice, to give thanks to God for my wife, when I see the number. I could do this without the numerical reminder, of course, but I've found that for me, having a mechanism like “518” to trigger my thanks ensures that I rejoice this way more often than I would otherwise. In fact, it usually happens between five and ten times each week. And then, like a boomerang, the “thanks” comes right back to me because I actually feel more grateful for my wife through this simple expression of gratitude to God, and that feeling of gratitude positively affects my character in her presence.

If you're married, you might want to try something like this. Make it a habit to thank God for your spouse. It will likely grow both your level of gratitude and your marriage at the same time.

Novel Habit #2: This sounds morbid, I know, but it works remarkably well for me. I've made a habit of scanning through the obituary section of the newspaper every day or two. I look at the pictures of the deceased. I contemplate the pained words of their loved ones. I pay special attention to the people who have died young. Through this uncomfortable activity, I'm reminded of both the preciousness and the brevity of life. And my perspective is often different—clearer and perfected—when I turn the page.

For Reflection and Discussion

What makes you feel grateful? Think back to those recent times that you have felt most grateful, and consider what seemed to activate a sense of gratitude in your life. Recall as many moments as possible, and look for common threads through these moments. Can you use these insights to identify some personal pathways to gratitude? If so, what novel habits can you adopt to become a more grateful person?

In a similar vein, I've tried to pay closer attention when I hear or read some news story about people who have little, whether they are local folks or people on the other side of the globe. Occasionally I make some time to visit websites that illuminate the plight of those in dire straits. As I do, I make mental notes of the statistics cited on such sites

(e.g., eight hundred million people in the world suffer from malnutrition and hunger; twenty-four thousand die every day from hunger or hunger-related diseases). The strategy is the same as with the obituaries: I try to expose myself to moving reminders that I am exceedingly blessed.

The Connection to God-Centeredness

As I've explained in this chapter, gratitude is a parent of the other Christian virtues. *People who have a grateful disposition, more so than those with any other virtue I've studied in this project, are likely to also have inner peace, joy, patience, kindness, faithfulness, self-control, compassion, and the ability to forgive.* Similarly, without gratitude, people are less likely to see those other virtues manifested in their life.

I've also described some habits that develop the kind of disciplined mind that grows and sustains gratitude. However, it's important to remember that fundamentally shifting your outlook from "I want" to "I have" takes time and perseverance. For those of us who seek quick results (and that may be the majority of us), this is an endeavor that is fraught with setbacks and frustration.

The good news, though, is that you need not pursue this change by yourself. God is your ally in this transformation. As you grow closer to God, the many habits that generate gratitude become natural. For example, the recommendations advanced in this chapter—discipline your thought life, thank God throughout the day, keep a gratitude journal, fast periodically, regularly confess sin, pray for the poor—are an outgrowth of that divine relationship. So we should not close this chapter without the following caution: *it would be imprudent to engage in some gratitude growth program apart from God*. Instead, if you want to become permanently grateful—if you want to experience long-term transformation in your thinking—imitate the strategy of high-virtue Christians: engage in this gratitude-growth program in tandem with a broader agenda to become more God-centered than you currently are. How one pursues that agenda is the focus of the next chapter.

A Summary of the Recommendations for Growing and Sustaining Gratitude

- Make a habit of thinking about the blessings in your life and thanking God for them. Make this a practice throughout every day. Consider keeping a daily gratitude journal to formalize this process of identifying the blessings.
- Watch for envy. Regularly examine yourself to identify where and when you are envious, and work toward rejecting such thoughts when they creep into your mind. Replace those thoughts with thanks to God for what you do have in life.
- Practice the disciplines of periodic fasting and regular confession of sin with one aim being a clearer understanding of the gifts bestowed on you in life.
- Expose yourself to information about the dire condition of others around the world, and make prayer for these people a staple of your prayer life.
- Create other habits that remind you of how blessed you are—and of how much worse life could be.
- Engage in this gratitude-growth program as part of a broader program to become a more God-centered person.